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THE MUSICAL TIMES, And Singing Class Circular.

AUGUST 1st, 1850.

CATHEDRAL MUSIC AND COMPOSERS.

No. IV.

Contributed by E. HOLMES, Author of the "Life of Mozart."

THE music to which Purcell listened, which he studied and formed his style upon, is only known with certainty as far as it regards the Italian school. Bassani, the master of Corelli, is said to have been his model; and, however that may be, he has certainly, in some of the prefaces to his compositions, admitted without reserve the decided superiority of Italian music. In the education of a great master in these times it must of necessity be supposed that the ear played a greater part than the eye; for we must not lose sight of the fact that the diffusion of music in separate parts, and through the laborious process of manuscript, rendered the advance of science difficult. Scores, except those which the composer made himself, must have been rarely in his possession; and the best music which he heard can have done little more for him than stimulate or give some favorable direction to his natural ability. As for the rules of counterpoint, they existed principally in tradition, and their authority was too undetermined to exercise much restriction of the free fancy and conception of the genial musician.

About 1680 we may conceive the art to be somewhat in this condition. Full part writing was giving way, and a song was in the highest estimation. While melody was thus advancing, the true art of accompaniment, as it regards the foundation of the orchestra—the stringed instruments—was beginning to be discovered; and though that powerful implement, the bow, ministered little or nothing of its present variety, yet the effect of holding notes in four parts on the strings, which remains extremely good to this day, was well understood. As an example of this we may refer to the air which Purcell has given, in his *Dido and Æneas*, to his heroine just before her death—an accompaniment which though written on the formal ground bass of the day, is so full of impassioned harmonies, striking suspensions, and unexpected progressions, that if heard with the delicate playing of our finest opera orchestra it would still awaken profound emotions of delight. We can find no counterpart to the condensed powerful expression of this piece unless we take it in *La Malinconia*, or some of the later and more poetical productions of Beethoven.

Together with the true offices of the voice and orchestra, which were now more fairly appropri-

ated, we must consider the attempt to express passions and sentiments in a free dramatic form by air and symphony as a great enlargement of the sphere of music, which had before been occupied in the research of such melodies as would afford good points of imitation, and turn well into a full-voiced piece of harmony. Not only was the variety of pleasure in the listener greatly enhanced by the abolition of a prescriptive form of composition, but the various designs of music itself became much more condensed, compact, and satisfactory in the course of this successful revolution of style. There is scarcely any one thing in which the classical moderns show their superiority more than in the design of their works—in the art of contrasting the movements, carrying on the interest of a piece without intervening dreary voids, and never writing a note too much. To leave off in the right place while the hearer is sprightly and desirous of more: to cut out in the text of a composition whatever may be unfavorable to the unity and progress of effect, is an office of judgment and taste in which Haydn and Mozart have greatly excelled; and it is in this point that the music of Purcell leaves one of its strongest impressions on the mind. Many of his anthems might be cited as perfect specimens of design; none, perhaps, is more unique than the melodious and favorite one—"Thy word is a lantern." That this could be surpassed in elegance, novelty, or condensation, it is impossible to conceive.

Purcell made no additions to madrigal composition, and it has been sometimes mentioned with surprise; for, though the taste for these works had declined much in his day, he must have heard and admired them. When music in any one of its many branches has reached perfection, and exhausted ingenuity, it is time for the ambitious artist to reform, remodel, and occupy himself with newer work, in which he may not be increasing the bulk without adding to the stock. It is impossible that a hero so armed at all points with canon and fugue, as Purcell, could have had any hesitation in entering the arena of the madrigal composers. There he must have found scattered, from time to time, flowers of the most graceful melody, and harmony so richly and effectively dispersed, that no composer up to our own times has gone beyond it—in proof of which we may notice the extraordinary effect of the madrigal performances of the chorus of the Royal Italian Opera during their late season of morning concerts. But this music, still so delightful and powerful in its contrast, especially so, served by the able and numerous singers of our dramatic chorus, was quite another thing when it formed the chief and staple commodity of the art. The province of musical invention seemed to require enlargement and a more just distribution into its

various departments, for melody would be in a manner annihilated if kept constantly within the shackles of counterpoint. What would become of expression if formality so continued to prevail that no melody should be adopted by any master which did not present a good point of imitation, or a capacity for fugal treatment? Fine counterpoint and the strict fugal style have inherent qualities of musical power; they still adorn the music of the church, and give dignity and elevation in proportion to the skill with which they are exercised. But it is long since this music, which in the pages of the great masters reveals itself as neatly and clearly as a mathematical demonstration, has had any character of original invention. In recurring to the works of the greatest contrapuntal musicians, nothing strikes more forcibly than the frequent repetition of the same things. We are reduced, therefore, to the necessity of believing, that either the circle of the subjects of counterpoint is somewhat contracted, and that the same thought has occurred to different people, or, that one composer has either inadvertently or designedly copied another. There cannot be a more difficult or a more thankless task than the endeavour to discover the original author of a subject of fugue or canon; even Handel, justly revered as he is, has sustained many charges of plagiarism, for which his tenacious memory is, perhaps, rather to be blamed than any mean propensity to dress himself in borrowed plumes. He wrote so much which was confessedly his own, as to be able to do what would not have been permitted to smaller men—as, for instance, his transferring an entire chorus of Carissimi, “Hear Jacob’s God,” into his oratorio, *Samson*, where it is known under those words.

Whatever were the motives which induced Purcell to make counterpoint but a secondary feature in his works, for he was powerful and original in that as in every thing else, it is certain that he has avoided the imputations which have been cast on some of his successors in that art. Taste was changing, and the near intercourse opened with France, under the Stuarts, modified the Italian influence which had prevailed here from the time of Elizabeth. Music in Paris has always been a fashion of some sort; and, under Lulli, court patronage gave it an accidental impulse towards progress. Overtures and other parts of dramatic music received a great accession of vigour from this master, and the skill of individual artists and singers began to be in estimation. Balthasar, a Swede, after being the musical lion of London and Oxford, where he astonished every one by running from the bottom of the violin to the top and back again, drunk himself to death in the excitement of popular applause. Such was the last shift of one who first introduced among us the art of shifting. Solo singing,

introduced here also from the French, and patronized at court, seems, if we may credit the tales of its origin, to have possessed its first exhibitors with a phrensy of absurd vanity. It is said, that Captain Cook, the master of the choir boys in Purcell’s time, was accounted the best singer to the lute, in England, until his pupil Humphreys returned from France, when he died from envy of his superior skill. It is probable that this story is a little coloured; envy being an insidious disease, seldom known to any but the sufferer, and never owned by him. In Grammont’s memoirs, however, we find that the guitar, as an instrument of accompaniment, was the favorite ornament of a lady’s boudoir; and in a Sunday-evening picture of the court of Charles II. we are introduced to His Majesty surrounded by the belles of his court, whom a French boy entertains with singing and the “lascivious pleasing of a lute.” Songs, therefore, were undoubtedly in fashion, whether singers died of envy or not.

That the energetic musical minds, which so suddenly burst forth at the Restoration, should have gladly bid farewell to the old forms of full composition, in which English and Italians had by turns surpassed each other, to become the leaders of a new style, it is natural to conceive. Humphreys and Wise lived but to indicate certain dispositions in sacred and secular music, which Purcell with his decided, vigorous, and masterly pen rapidly followed up and formed into that nervous style which still distinguishes the best of our English music from that of foreign countries. It has been justly said, that there is something in our old cathedral music which makes it stand alone in the art. English genius certainly found in the diversified expression of the language of the scriptures, and in the free style of the verse anthem, which permitted every relief of choral or melodious contrast, a stimulus to production which the more confined Catholic ritual denied to the composers of its Latin text. The brevity and condensation of Purcell’s cathedral choruses aid their grandeur. The long-wrought oratorio chorus, however skilfully treated, cannot compare, in its grasp of interest on the hearer, with the few bars of chorus with which Purcell commonly winds up a verse anthem; where, however short, he always finds occasion for some surprising turn of harmony, or note, that strikes like a thunder clap. The short chorus at the end of the anthem, “They that go down to the sea,” and the powerful B flat which occurs in the “Hallelujah” at the end of “Thy word is a lantern,” will at once illustrate this peculiarity of his genius. In the cathedral, he is full of the solemn influences of the place, and his music is worthy of its noblest associations; but in every other department of the art, Purcell is a totally different man.

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Even up to this moment, when the last quartets and symphonies of Beethoven are beginning, by dint of repetition, to be pretty generally comprehended, Purcell has not become one of those whose ideas are easily anticipated by any aid of tradition or routine. The enlarged experience of posterity has thrown no light upon the source of his musical inspiration; and this constant novelty—this natural yet eccentric path which he reserved to himself on all occasions, is one of the finest attributes of Purcell's genius. Let an able and practised accompanist be set to play the harmonies to a sonata of Corelli, or a trio of Handel, and he will be able, from hearing the commencing bars, to form a pretty good idea of the general train of the thoughts and current of the modulation; but he will find the case different should the trio be one of Purcell's. Even in his own early age of instrumental science Purcell anticipated its real destination; he sat down to please by novelty and the stimulus of surprise, utterly rejecting whatever might be easily known and claimed as common property.

It is quite impossible that a musician, whose mind reared itself in this lofty independence in all styles above his cotemporaries, should recommend himself to the richer patrons of art for any adequate reward. He lived passionately admired by some discriminating musicians of his own time, like Mozart, but with his music left so much to its own resources that it is to be feared he was mostly in straightened circumstances, not much better than those in which Dryden, in a sister art, won his great fame. Hall, the organist of Hereford, Purcell's companion in boyhood, thought that a thousand years would scarcely produce another Purcell.

For the warm eulogy of which our Orpheus has been the subject, there must be some grounds of personal accomplishment and attraction independent of the composer, on which we could desire to be better informed. Purcell, at the back of one of his portraits, is designated "actor;" and as the profession of cathedral and stage singer seems to have been for many years in very close connection, it is not improbable that he may have exhibited in some impersonation of character. For the knowledge that he sung in public society we may thank the records of the Stationers' annual feast on St. Cecilia's Day,—we forget the year, but in one of the odes performed at their hall, it is said that "the principal part was sung with inimitable graces by Mr. Purcell himself." The lineaments of his countenance were well adapted to the expression of heroic sentiment, and his noble declamation of heroic poetry shows how he felt it. We cannot help thinking, that in the famous boarding-school opera, performed at Mr. Josias Priest's, and

which Purcell composed for him in his 19th year, that the composer sustained the part of "Æneas" himself. So insignificant an accident as this performance, of which, nevertheless, a more lengthened and minute account would now be read with great interest, seems to have determined the inclinations of the master towards dramatic music, which he pursued at intervals even to the close of life, amidst its most adverse and fluctuating fortunes.

What an age was this for a man on his own resources to embrace and realize the character of universal musician! In Germany, Handel and Bach were yet to appear upon the scene; in Italy, there had been no Scarlatti to construct a model for opera airs and cantatas—no Vinci or Pergolesi to exhibit the art of simple chaste expression—no Galuppi to anticipate the secret of modern orchestral effect, or the elegant turn of modern melody. All that Purcell had seen done in the new world of music, which was opening in his day, consisted of sketchy and partial excellence; yet, with no other aid than this, he accomplished so much in the several departments of church, dramatic, chamber, and instrumental music, that we wait a full century after him to observe a composer in another country occupying the same ground with equal applause. A crowd of musicians succeeded him in Italy and Germany, whose works are occasionally referred to for their curious felicity, or produced for historical illustration. Purcell's works have quite a different standing. A great proportion of them still live in the genuine admiration of musicians as firmly rooted as our language and poetry, and unqualified by any allowance for the rude age which gave birth to them. *King Arthur*, the principal dramatic piece of its author, exists still in the repertory of the modern opera, and has been heard with pleasure by the side of Weber and Beethoven. No old composer was ever satisfactorily produced with so little retrenchment or alteration as Purcell. His incantation scene in the *Indian Queen*, and his frost scene in *King Arthur*, still command breathless attention in a modern drawing-room, whenever well sung to an intelligent auditory. The celebrations of Purcell's church music, which take place from time to time, always give the highest delight, and promise so to extend the circle of his hearers as to arouse attention to these periodical gatherings, and to render them more public and more befitting the fame of our great composer. It has even been proposed, and it would certainly be an interesting experiment, to reprint the sonatas and instrumental trios of Purcell.

Burney's father, who knew Purcell well, told his son that for nearly 30 years after the composer's death scarcely any other music than his was listened to; but at last it gave way to Handel

and the superior attractions of the wonderful Italian singers of the 18th century. The creation of bass recitative and air in its fullest dignity, may certainly be assigned to Purcell. His musical imagination is always equal with, or beyond the level of, the poetry; he is inspired as he reads it, and grandeur, sweetness, and pathos are equally at his command. Handel must have been surrounded with the compositions of Purcell on his arrival in England, and the orchestral *Te Deum* and *Jubilate in D*, must have afforded him one of his strongest and earliest impressions of the ecclesiastical music of the country. He must have heard also, in Croft, those cathedral changes of harmony and those declamatory choruses which distinguished our old church music. What excellent hints he received every one knows who can judge of many of his recitatives, bass airs, and choruses. Handel has the merit of inventing the English oratorio; but he was either involved in difficulties with singers, or better adapted to supply the material than to put it into order for performance. Omission and re-arrangement are continually required on a first public representation of his works. In the length and sequence of his pieces Purcell's judgment is irreproachable, after the lapse of nearly two centuries.

(To be continued.)

PARISH ORGANISTS.

WE observed an advertisement in *The Times* a few days since, which appeared to us of a kind that it may be useful to comment upon: firstly, because it shows to what a low rate the remuneration of the highest kind of musical knowledge is reduced; and, secondly, that our own experience may guard the novitiate of the profession against pecuniary disappointment and vexation of spirit. The advertisement was from a provincial professor, who addressed himself to his brethren of the tuneful art—offering to introduce an educated musician to a practice which he was about to leave, the value of which he estimated at about £200 per annum: the premium required was moderate—£30; and then came the enticing announcement to a young professor, that the parish organ might be obtained: this—together with the salary, which at present amounted to £25, and might by exertion be increased to £30!—was sufficient to excite the imagination of a youthful aspirant to fame and fortune! However, it is not with the value of the practice, or the amount (which we really think moderate) required for the introduction to it, that we have any concern; our object being more immediately to direct attention to the sum considered necessary for the remuneration of a parochial organist, whose education, if it be of a nature thoroughly to qualify him for the post, can scarcely be inferior to many of the lower grade of the clergy; for, be it understood, not only is a musical education necessary in such a case, but that kind of knowledge which is imparted at first-rate schools should form one of the qualifications of a competent parochial organist.

First, then, as to the amount of remuneration. It is absolutely impossible to obtain a properly qualified organist at a salary which to such a man must be positively beneath consideration: the sum usually offered varies from twenty-five to forty pounds a year—and, for this pittance, punctuality of attendance on Sunday, and that most irksome of all duties, frequently twice in the week, of teaching an

ignorant choir, are expected: he must patiently listen to the requirements of minister, churchwardens, and congregation, whose respective musical taste, such as it is, is generally quite at variance with each other, and whose criticism—ignorant as voluntary and mischievous—is a source of continued irritation and vexation to the organist. He hears the churchwarden express his admiration of the Old 100th, and other old "Church tunes:" the minister, for the purpose of accommodating the taste of his flock, prefers those of a more modern kind; and the silken members of the congregation think neither collection fashionable enough;—amidst this confusion of opinion, the organist, perhaps, dares to think for himself; and, being probably a man of sound principle and enlightened understanding, adapts his materials to his means, and plays such music only as can be decently executed, and such as he thinks most in accordance with the sacred character of the duties he has to perform. Then comes the greatest enemy of all—a professor who is emulous to obtain the situation: he gains the ear of some would-be great man in the parish or locality—to whose prejudices he not only agrees to pander, but also to surrender the right of private judgment—promising, on receiving the appointment, to make the choir sing like "an angel," even though the members of it have no voices! Such is often the course pursued; the result proves the truth of the proverb about "new brooms," and sometimes the effect of the change is not even equal to that.

Such are the bickerings in country places—such the ignorant strife of some country congregations, that it is a well-known fact, that where a finished and competent musician has been displaced because his standard of knowledge was not in accordance with that of his auditory, a second-rate performer has been for a time regarded as a perfect paragon; the abuse, however, is at last its own antidote. We live in hopes that our beloved art may ere long become better understood; and juster appreciation and remuneration will follow. Until then, the consummation so devoutly to be wished will be looked for in vain.—From "*The Musical and Dramatic Review*."

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R. P. G. is thanked for the canon which, however, is respectfully declined for our pages.

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Brief Chronicle of the last Month.

POPLAR AMATEUR MUSICAL SOCIETY.—This Society gave their first concert since the introduction of instrumental performers, at the new Lecture Hall, Hale-street, on the 16th July, which was well attended. Part 1 contained Romberg's *Te Deum* in D, and a selection of sacred music from the works of Handel and Mendelssohn. Part 2 comprised Handel's *Dettingen Te Deum* and the *Coronation Anthem*. We are glad to see the progress made by the society under the able direction of Mr. C. Robinson, the conductor.